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Chinese social media continues to rage at United, and the airline may face real fallout

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Sophia Yan | Huileng Tan

Wednesday, 12 Apr 2017 | 12:55 AM ET

Chinese social media has exploded with outrage after a video went viral showing a passenger who appeared to be of Asian ethnicity being dragged off an overbooked [United Airlines](#) flight with a bloodied nose.

The topic, [#UnitedAirlinesforcespassengeroffplane](#), has held strong as a top trending topic over the last two days on Weibo, [China's](#) answer to Twitter.

"The boycott starts with me," posted one online user, BJ Shizilu, along with a photo of his shredded Mileage Plus card. Another said, "Whether

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the passenger is Asian or not, this is abominable," according to a post by Koukou Liang.

Another Weibo user said, "No need to apologize or explain...please sue United Airlines till it collapses. Boycott fully."

In a post on his verified Weibo account that generated some 50,000 likes in over three hours, Chinese American comedian Joe Wong said the passenger who reportedly said he was selected for being Chinese deserves a "thumbs up" as many Chinese who feel discriminated against don't say it out loud so as not to lose face.



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Tuesday, 11 Apr 2017 | 9:28 PM ET | 01:57

"This results in the Western mainstream media and public not taking discrimination against Asians seriously," he added.

A Chinese social media account for Richard Liu, the CEO of e-commerce firm [JD.com](http://www.jd.com), complained about United's service, describing it as the worst in the world.

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The giant avalanche of virulent comments against United could mean a big headache for the airline, as it has a lot at stake in China. United is the largest U.S. carrier operating in China, accounting for 20 percent of all flights between the two countries — that amounts to nearly 100 flights a week.

Airlines have raced to get into the world's largest consumer market, as more middle class Chinese seek more business and holiday travel. China is expected to topple the U.S. as the largest market by passenger volume by around 2024, according to the International Air Transport Association.

United is now struggling to contain a giant public relations crisis.

On Monday evening, CEO Oscar Munoz [said in a letter to employees obtained by CNBC](#) that employees "followed established procedures" when removing a passenger from a plane because it was overbooked, and calling the passenger "disruptive and belligerent."

Munoz did issue an apology on Tuesday, saying ["we will work to make it right."](#)

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But it may be too little, too late.

"Airlines have been very slowly adapting to the new communication environment," said John Bailey, managing director of public relations firm Ketchum. "Even now, they are struggling to get it right – quickly enough."

The man dragged off the plane has since been identified as Dr. David Dao, who is now undergoing treatment in a Chicago hospital for his injuries, according to a statement from two Chicago lawyers representing the Dao family.



Sophia Yan
Beijing Correspondent, CNBC

Huileng Tan
Reporter

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